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Viewpoints: Feds Must Fund Our AIDS War; Put House bill on fast track June 18, 1990

Newsday

"Having missed our opportunity to provide an ounce of prevention, we must now prepare to pay for pounds and pounds of cure," Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) declared last week as the House voted to grant the nation's AIDS-racked cities emergency relief. New York, which has suffered more than 16,000 AIDS deaths so far, would get upwards of \$ 100 million for early detection and treatment. In May, the Senate approved a similar but stingier measure.

It's wonderful news that Congress is finally willing to help beleaguered localities with money for care. But in truth, these bills are considerably less than pounds of cure. They will simply enable us to handle the disaster more wisely and humanely.

By stressing testing and early intervention, Congress hopes to make the most of new therapies involving drugs such as AZT. For many, early treatment can slow the onslaught of the disease. With prompt care, many people infected with the AIDS virus may stay healthier and out of hospitals longer. While they buy precious time, hospitals may pick up precious bed space. This strategy is also more cost effective; it's cheaper to treat outpatients than inpatients. Such economies are crucial for a city like ours, struggling to increase its AIDS beds by about 14 percent by next year.

Unfortunately, President Bush doesn't seem to grasp this clear logic. Whether he'll sign or veto the final legislation is unclear, but the White House calls the House bill too costly and worries that the legislation would set a "dangerous precedent" because it's targeted to a specific disease. Actually, say city officials, if more AIDS sufferers can avoid hospitals, more beds will be available for everyone. Bush should sign this measure.